

The Motivational Psalm of Life

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's lyric poem "A Psalm of Life" portrays a youthful soul, eager to uplift and encourage a psalmist who lost their way. Simplistic and straightforward, the poem excitedly delves into human views upon life. The poem gives the reader a deeper understanding of how one should approach the problems in life, always seeking to improve either one's mindset or situation. Stanza by stanza, "A Poem of Life" exhibits the ultimate encouraging and hopeful spirit, providing instructions for purposeful living and embodying the soul of vitality and the optimistic view of self betterment and fulfillment.

The first stanza begins as the speaker dismisses the depressing views of the psalmist he speaks to. The poem explains that life is real and believing otherwise puts one in an illusion. If one believes in the supposed futility of life, then their soul sleeps and eventually dies. The second stanza builds on this idea, proclaiming the Realness of life, "Life is real! Life is earnest!" (Longfellow). The third line of this stanza contains an allusion to the book of Genesis, further developing an admonition of the superficial, depraved views of human life occasionally presented in religion (Poetry for Students). Although the mortal body dies, the true source of life, the soul, will always live on. The third stanza moves away from arguing the reality of life and presents the theme of the poem. It reminds the reader that simple emotion such as joy or sorrow pale in comparison to the importance of action in life. Action fuels the progress of life, both for mankind and or the individual. In 19th century America, this stanza makes a bigger impact than it might in other times. At the time the nation filled itself with pride in hard work and progress, and many Americans easily identified with and believed in this poem's ideals (Hovey).

The fourth stanza brings to the reader's attention the structure of "A Psalm of Life." Presented in quatrains with an *abab* rhyme scheme, the poem pulls itself along rhythmically. The

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trochaic form of stressed and unstressed syllables gives a sense of never-ending progress (Poetry for Students). Highlighted by the third and fourth lines of the stanza, “Still, like muffleddrums, are beating/ Funeral marches to the grave,” the beating of syllables in the poem acts as a symbol for the progress of mortal life towards death (Longfellow). Additionally, this overall structure closely relates to common protestant hymns, adding to the pseudo religious fervor behind Longfellow’s didactic meditations in this poem (Littlefield). The fifth stanza presents yet another metaphor for life- that of a battle camp site. Longfellow urges the reader to live life to the fullest as hero rather than give up and blindly run into “battle” to be slaughtered like cattle. Longfellow calls upon personal experience in this claim, as his wife had passed away prior to the writing of this poem. He believes that giving up even in times of turmoil would lead to an empty life, no better than dying (Poetry for Students). In the sixth stanza the speaker describes how one may live their life as hero. He again focuses on the importance of action, repeating the word “act” to draw the reader’s attention. Line 23 states, “Act, -act in the living Present!” where both the repetition and the caesura inserted after the first “act” both serve to emphasize this central theme (Longfellow). Spending one’s time either living in the past or waiting on the future both fail, in the sense that only the present can change. This ideology of action and purpose coincides heavily with many beliefs early in America, primarily that of Benjamin Franklin. Whether on accident or on purpose, Longfellow teaches many similar lessons in this poem as Franklin did in his writing (Littlefield). Consequently, these ideals received quick and easy acceptance among most readers.

The seventh stanza urges the reader to see the possibilities in life through the successes of past heroes. In times of adversity, one may find it strenuously difficult to self motivate, so the speaker offers a look to those who have overcome the same troubles for the motivation to do the same for oneself. As central themes of this poem, courage and confidence serve as the basis for

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living purposefully, and the means by which one may better their life (Hovey). The final line of the seventh stanza presents a metaphor for the heroes of the past, where these great men have left “Footprints on the sands of time” (Longfellow). The eighth stanza expands this metaphor, using it as a governing idea. A shipwrecked soul who sees these footprints understands that someone has already been in his situation, and has succeeded in surviving. Thus the man who wanted to give up has found new hope in the knowledge that survival is not an impossible task. This symbolizes the ability of any discouraged or disheartened individual to overcome suffering and continue on the path to greatness (Poetry for Students). The ninth and final stanza serves almost the same purpose as a call to action would, where the speaker gives one last word of encouragement for the reader to leave this experience a better person. The stanza summarizes the overarching theme of the poem, where the speaker teaches the reader the importance of living with heart and with purpose no matter what difficulties may come.

This poem easily and confidently serves its purpose of providing insight and encouragement to those in need of a purpose in life. Whether disheartened or merely disillusioned, a reader of this poem will find that wallowing in depression or doubt is no way to lead a successful life. Though some may find this poem overly didactic, Longfellow wrote it as such and in so poetic a manner that the reader can enjoy it nonetheless (Littlefield). “A Psalm of Life” stands as one of the many fantastic poetry works to come out of America’s early literary history.

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Works Cited

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